



Committee on
HOMELAND SECURITY
Chairman Michael McCaul

Opening Statement

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Media Contact: Charlotte Sellmyer
(202) 226-8417

**Statement of Chairman Susan Brooks (R-IN)
Subcommittee on Emergency Preparedness, Response, and Communications**

**“Emergency MGMT 2.0: How #SocialMedia & New Tech are Transforming Preparedness,
Response, & Recovery #Disasters #Part2 #Govt/NGOs”**

**July 9, 2013
Remarks as Prepared**

There is no doubt that social media and new technologies are playing an increasing role in the way we prepare for, respond to, and recover from disasters. As we have seen through recent events, such as Hurricane Sandy and the Boston bombings, individuals and organizations, more than ever, are turning to social media and the Internet to obtain public safety information, to connect with friends and family, and to request assistance from emergency response organizations. In fact, in a 2012 survey conducted by the Red Cross, 70 percent of respondents suggested that emergency response agencies should regularly monitor their social media sites so they can promptly respond to any requests for help. In addition, an Infographic created by the University of San Francisco showed that during a disaster, one out of three citizens expects help to arrive within 60 minutes of posting a request on social media.¹

Social media also enables response organizations to quickly push information to the public – something that has not been possible on such a wide scale until recently. A great example of this was after the Boston bombings when the first official announcement that Dzhokhar Tsarnaev had been captured came not at a traditional press conference, but through a tweet by the Boston Police Department. Also, during the search for the Tsarnaev brothers, individual citizens were able to tweet and post videos, photos, and other information to law enforcement officials, which served as a “force multiplier” and assisted in the hunt.

¹ University of San Francisco Website. Accessed on June 20, 2013, <http://onlinempa.usfca.edu/social-media/>

We have also seen similar examples in which response officials have leveraged information from social media to enhance response efforts during recent natural disasters, such as Hurricane Sandy and the Oklahoma tornadoes.

Two of the most prominent emergency management organizations are with us today, the American Red Cross and the Federal Emergency Management Agency. Earlier this year, I had the opportunity to visit both of their headquarters to learn more about their roles in preparing for, responding to, and recovering from disasters. I was impressed to see how they have incorporated 21st-century technology into their operations.

During my visit to the Red Cross, I learned how they partnered with Dell to develop a Digital Operations Center, which is the first social-media monitoring platform dedicated to humanitarian relief.² This center allows the Red Cross to crowdsource information from affected areas during a disaster; spot trends and better anticipate the public's needs; and connect people with the resources they need, such as food, water, shelter, or even emotional support.

In conjunction with the Digital Operations Center, the Red Cross has also developed a Digital Volunteer Program, which trains digital volunteers from across the country in how to use online applications to respond to questions from the public, distribute critical public safety information, and provide comfort and reassurance during emergencies. During Hurricane Sandy, the digital volunteers played a critical role in enabling the Red Cross to actively monitor and verify social media posts around the clock and provide information to create situational awareness.

FEMA's Administrator, Craig Fugate, has been a big supporter of social media as well, and FEMA has been an active user of Facebook and Twitter to communicate with the public. I've also heard that FEMA is engaging with private sector companies, including Google³ and Twitter,⁴ to determine how best to take advantage of open data, social media, and two-way interaction to enhance their emergency management capabilities.

We are also seeing a rise in the use of social media by state and local emergency management organizations. In a recent survey conducted by the National Emergency Management Association and CNA on the use of social media in the emergency management field, the majority of state, county, and local agencies reported using social media in their disaster preparedness and response efforts, but to varying degrees.

I think a good example of the use of social media at the local level is how the cities of Moore and Oklahoma City used their Twitter accounts during the devastating tornadoes last month. Both cities used Twitter to relay real-time updates on open shelters, road closures, lost and found pets,

²American Red Cross Website. Accessed on June 20, 2013. <http://www.redcross.org/news/press-release/The-American-Red-Cross-and-Dell-Launch-First-Of-Its-Kind-Social-Media-Digital-Operations-Center-for-Humanitarian-Relief>

³ FEMA Website: Accessed on June 21, 2013, http://www.fema.gov/medialibrary/media_records/1081

⁴ FEMA Website. Accessed on June 21, 2013, http://www.fema.gov/medialibrary/media_records/3581

and personal items. They also actively monitored their accounts and responded to requests for assistance posted by disaster survivors.

In my home state of Indiana, MESH Coalition, a public health, non-profit, public-private partnership is using social media for, what they call, “infodemiology.” They have dedicated staff monitoring social media as a disease surveillance tool and push information to hospitals and public health departments through Twitter. I had the opportunity to see this operation first hand last week. I am hopeful that this innovative use of social media and new technology will be replicated beyond the Hoosier state.

While I have highlighted some positive developments in the use of social media and new technology, I do realize that there are some challenges as well. For example, we must be mindful of how misleading, faulty, or malicious information or pictures can escalate quickly on social media sites and potentially negatively affect response efforts. In addition, as we learned from our private sector partners in the last hearing, there is a need to establish common standards and procedures to help make the sharing of data more efficient. Our private sector witnesses also agreed that there could be more done in the way of public/private sector partnerships to help maximize the use of social media for disaster purposes, and to leverage big data so response and recovery efforts can be focused on those areas most in need.

I am pleased to welcome our distinguished panel of witnesses, and I look forward to hearing your perspectives on these issues.

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